

# **"A Hiberno-Mexican Story: The Presence of the Irish in Mexico"**

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*Paper delivered to the Academia Nacional de Historia y Geografía – National Academy of History and Geography, Mexico City, 3 March 2011*

## **Introduction**

Modern-day Mexico is populated by a number of clearly recognisable ethnic groups, who are relatively large in number, generally marry among themselves and in some cases maintain a certain measure of distinctive culture and way of thinking that characterises their race. The Lebanese, Jewish and Chinese communities are good examples of this: relatively recent arrivals to these shores, their numbers and social solidarity keep them intact as an identifiable group. They have not disappeared in the same way that African slaves, mostly of course men, were rapidly diluted by intermarrying in the area of Veracruz in the eighteenth century. By contrast, there are other groups who arrived to Mexico in far smaller numbers, in different parts of a vast and unpaved land, and at diverse times. Most of the Europeans who came to live here did so as individuals or in small contingents, retaining their surnames and possibly their physical characteristics, in a few cases creating their own social clubs and schools: the French, British, Germans, Swiss, and so on.

Even within this second category, the Irish never represented a very large minority. The Irish-Mexicans (or we can romantically call them the Hiberno-Mexicans) can be separated into four distinct groups:

1. Those in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries who were born in Ireland, went to Spain or perhaps the United States, and then ended up living in Mexico
2. Those born in Spain of Irish descent who later came to Mexico
3. From the nineteenth century onwards, those actually born in Ireland who as a matter of purpose or accident arrived to Mexico
4. Those actually born in Mexico and who are of Irish descent.

The Irish who emigrated to the United States of America, Canada and Australia in great numbers, and even those who chose to live in sizeable numbers in Argentina, did not often follow a similar triangulated route in order to get to their final destination.



**Emigrants leaving Ireland (1868)**

A brief word could be mentioned at this point concerning the amount of information available about the Irish in Mexico and the breadth of research that has been done on this subject. There is no large central source of information about Irish-Mexicans; indeed their numbers were never great and one consequence of the upheavals of the nineteenth century is that less information was actually recorded than in other countries. I will make a comparison which, to my mind, is quite revealing. With its headquarters in Switzerland, there exists a Society for Irish Latin America Studies which publishes a research journal and has a large quantity of ordered data, both biographical and numerical, about the Irish but principally as this relates to Argentina and its neighbouring countries. This is explained by the high numbers of emigrants to Argentina and the cyclical accumulation of facts and figures relating to them, particularly since the nineteenth century. In fact the breadth of information goes back to before this: for example, there exist details concerning the arrival in 1749 of the Lynch family to Buenos Aires, an action that would lead six generations later to the birth of the Irish Argentine Ernesto “Ché” Guevara Lynch and the overthrow of the Bautista regime in Cuba in the 1950s.

In general, the comparatively prosperous Argentina was a very attractive destination for the non-Spanish speaking European. The process to bring Irish people to Argentina typically involved intermediaries who often went to their own counties back home and enticed their countrymen with offers of land, employment and opportunity for the skilled lower middle class, and an escape for the poor land tenants from the perennial threat of famine and destitution. An agent who did exactly this was Edmund Casey who, along with a partner William R. Gilmour, began selling tracts of lands in Santa Fe to Irish farmers and others from 1879 onwards. A certain organisational structure was already in place: six years before, the St. Patrick's Society had already been established to promote emigration from Ireland. The emigration that did take place is a peculiarly unknown historical fact among Irishmen today: by 1841 there were 3,500 people of Irish birth living in the still-small city of Buenos Aires, mostly from the one county of Westmeath, and the number of Irish Argentines had risen to perhaps 110,000 by 1917.



**Map of the 32 counties of Ireland**

### **Early Irish**

There exists a Toltec legend speaking of a man with fair skin and a blond beard who taught the Toltec people the virtues of brotherly charity, acceptance of God's will and the secular benefits of improved methods of agriculture and use of metals. These elements have been teasingly related to the adventures of the Irish missionary, St. Brendan of

Clonfert, an argument based on comments expressed in the “Novatio Brendani”. The theory argues that Brendan was the representative of Quetzalcoyotl and the precursor of the equally white-skinned Hernan Cortés. (Of course, it should be said in passing that practically the only religious that has not been attributed to the well-travelled Brendan is a lunar mission.)



**St. Brendan and the Whale (15th century)**

Quite possibly the first Irishmen to step onto the continent of America were members of Christopher Columbus’s crew, perhaps recruits from his visit to the west of Ireland in 1477. There is certainly evidence of an Irishman called John Martin who was marooned on the Mexican coast with one hundred others by the privateer John Hawkins in 1568 because Hawkins had no room for them in his surviving vessels; he was executed seven years later. During the vice-royalty of New Spain, most Irishmen who came to the colony were either priests, soldiers or colonial servants: as such, they were typically graduates of the clerical institutes of Spain or Rome, members of the military such as the Hibernia Regiment stationed in Mexico from 1768 to 1771, or former students of the Real Colegio de Nobles Irlandeses (established 1593).



### Hibernia Regiment – Uniform and Flag

Two individuals are typical of these men. The first, “El Capitán Colorado”, Hugo O’Conor, was the first Commandant Inspector of the Interior Province from 1771 and later governor of the Yucatán, and is remembered today for his military reforms and two general campaigns against the stubbornly recalcitrant Apaches – a pragmatist, he was strongly in favour of employing Indian allies to fight along with the Spanish. The second was the son of immigrants from the south of Ireland, Juan O’Donojú, the new viceroy in 1821 who managed in the few months of life that Mexico allowed him to sign the Treaty of Cordoba establishing Mexican independence.



Hugo O’Conor



Juan O’Donojú

The honour of being the only Irishman represented on the “Monumento a la Independencia” does not belong to him but rather to William Lamport, author of the first declaration of independence (which notably supported such measures as racial equality, land reform and a democratically elected monarchy, advanced ideas for the early seventeenth century) and apparently the model for Johnston McCulley’s novel about the womanising but socially responsible Zorro. This interest in the well-being of the indigenous and the suppressed is a recurring theme in the history of the Irish in Mexico: one instance is the Franciscan Juan Augustín Morfi, chaplain of expeditions to the northern territories, who had written within fifteen years of his arrival to Mexico an especially powerful investigation of the native people, *Viaje de Indios y Diario del Nuevo México*. Something of the same empathetic pressure shown previous generations of Irishmen in New Spain formed part of the motivation among certain soldiers of the U.S. interventionist forces of 1846 and 1847 to change sides.

### **The Irish in Texas and northern Mexico**

The regions of Spanish North America where Irish people had settled in relatively large numbers were the Louisiana Territory (passed from French to Spanish control in 1762 and governed for a short period by the Irish-born Field Marshall Alexandro O’Reilly) and the area now covered by the modern state of Texas. There was some degree of ambivalence among the Irish in terms of their loyalty to their political masters, whether they were the Spanish or later the Mexicans. But it is noteworthy that upon completion of the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 by the United States and the creation of the new state of Coahuila and Texas in 1824, immigration by Irish Catholics into Texas was actively encouraged. Their cooperation in doing this was assisted by the pressure of Protestant newcomers to this area, animated by racial and sectarian nativist ideas. A good example of what happened during this period involves the Irish settlers who began arriving to the Texan towns of Refugio in 1829 and San Patricio in 1831. Their journey from Ireland to these destinations was a typical story of disease and shipwreck. A cholera epidemic killed two hundred of them while they were quarantined off New Orleans. One of their consolations was the aid they received from Mexican people and officials.

The Irish *empresarios* or land agents offered each family one “labor” (177 acres) of land if they used it for cultivation but a far larger area of one “sitio” (4,428 acres) if they raised livestock. A further enticement of an additional quarter of the total was offered if they married a Mexican national. The *empresario* himself was to receive five “sitios” (c. 22,000 acres) plus five “labores” for each one hundred families he brought. The settlements themselves turned out to be two of the very few agreements that were actually successful at this time in Texas. The son of the former viceroy of Peru, Bernardo O’Higgins, talked from 1823 to 1830 of the importance of a colonisation comprising such industrious and brave people [the Irish]” but, as in Chile, his plans came to nothing.



**Louisiana Territory (in dark green)**

There are reports that, during this period directly after the independence of Mexico in 1821, there was antagonism between some Irish Catholics and new settlers who were Protestant and in favour of the United States. The loyalties of the Irish were finally revealed in the 1835 Texan War. Two of the four *empresarios* favoured secession, while another, Dr. John Hewetson, remained loyal to the government of Santa Ana, abandoned his properties and went to live in Matamoros (although reputedly he still died a wealthy man). This forced exit or voluntary departure of Irish people loyal to the Mexican republic partly explains the large quantity of Irish surnames – Byrne, Walsh, Foley, Hayes and O’Leary – still found in states like Chihuahua, Nuevo León and Durango. As was said earlier, quite often the Irish quite often found themselves by the machinations of historical accident in locations they had not originally intend to inhabit. A last chapter in this series of projects by Irish *empresarios* occurred when a plan was submitted by Fr. Eugene McNamara to settle 10,000 Irish people in northern California. The proposal was again partly based on the argument that they would be a bulwark against the encroaching Americans and become active players in the economic development of the region, but the Treaty of Hidalgo ending the Mexican-American War in 1849 made this plan irrelevant – Mexico had forfeited California.



possessions, the scene of much bloodshed against native peoples and investment of treasury, were under-populated yet obviously very attractive to an admittedly more entrepreneurial nation which clearly recognised the advantages of possessing the ports of San Francisco and San Diego, the natural resources of Nevada, a trade route through New Mexico and the vast farming lands in between. As with the intervention of the British, Spanish and French in the 1860s, the formal reason given for hostilities was the non-payment of outstanding loans and indemnities. In light of this grievous omission on the part of Mexicans, the offer of US\$5 million for New Mexico and US\$25 million for California probably appeared quite munificent; after all the imperial French had previously seen commonsense and sold the equally remote and transparently underdeveloped Louisiana Territory, as the Russians would later do with Alaska. But the Mexicans were proud that their recently independent country extended deep into North America, that it contained tremendous possibilities that would be plundered in good time. In any case, that stubborn survivor of his own shortcomings, Santa Ana, was back in the presidential palace.

All of this acts as an introduction to the famous band of soldiers, the so-called San Patricios, whose ranks – contrary to the belief of many – were never more than 60% Irish but whose ethos and passionate sense of the little man against the bully were characteristically Irish. The soldiers comprised men born in at least seven different European countries excluding Ireland, plus Canadians, Mexicans, Americans and even escaped slaves. With very few actual US citizens, it was a small United Nations with belligerent Catholic sensitivities. Though its nominal commander was Colonel Francisco Moreno, its most famous soldier was the leader of its first company, Brevet Major John Riley.

The practice of recruiting foreigners into the Mexican Army was already well established: by the opening of hostilities in 1846, sixteen foreigners had already reached the rank of general in the Mexican armed forces. Several Irish-Mexicans counted among the many Irishmen who eventually would fight in the battalion. There were also young men born in Ireland who were recruited in the southern United States. One can well imagine that their initial entry into the US Army was governed more by the need for income and adventure than for a deep sense of loyalty to the country they hardly knew whose racism against them reminded them of their treatment back home as the inferior race of the British Isles. One should however keep in mind that they did not simply *desert* the US Army as so many others did; they actually went further, ignoring the temptation to disappear into the empty vastness of the western United States, and *defected* to the Mexican forces.

In some cases, the mercenary mentality certainly did operate: after all the Mexicans were offering citizenship, higher wages than the US Army and a minimum of 1.3 square kilometres of land to each new recruit, all succinctly explained in leaflets in English, German and French. If a man ignored the quite obvious inevitability of US victory and the concurrent ire of military justice even for non-citizens in its army, then this incentive was important. But one should also recall that the human being is sensitive to what he witnesses, especially if he can put himself in the place of the victim. This sympathy was certainly identified as a motivation to defect by Catholics: as Jack Bauer expresses it, “On

reaching Mexico they discovered they had been hired by heretics to slaughter brethren of their own church.” The leaflets encouraged this sympathy and the “impulsive and emotional” decision was made by a tiny minority of Irish soldiers in the US Army to change sides. Though in line for a lieutenants’ commission, John Riley himself lasted only seven months in the US Army before he was motivated to pass to the Mexican side, before war was even declared but at a point at which hostilities would have appeared inevitable.



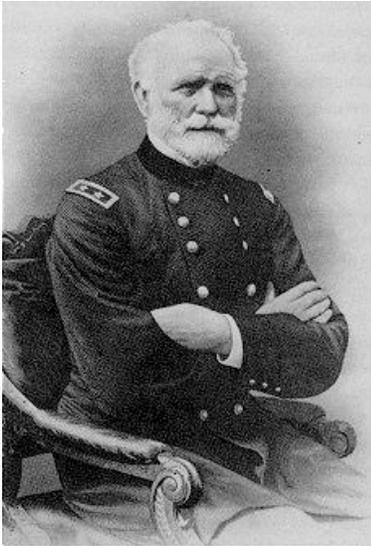
**Battle of Churubusco, Mexico City**

The newly configured St. Patrick’s Battalion participated in five major engagements against the Americans. Beginning as a artillery force at the Battle of Monterrey in September 1846, they were equipped with the heaviest guns that could be mustered, plus two six-pounders they captured at the Battle of Buena Vista or Angostura in February 1847. They were the main response on the Mexican side to US horse soldiery. However, though they numbered among their ranks men who had served in the armies of other countries, their weakness lay in the lack of heavy guns and the propensity of the poorly trained and officered Mexican militia to engage the enemy with equal tenacity and skill. As highly capable deserters to the opposing army, their fate if captured would have been very clear. There exist records of their stubbornness as fighting men that impressed both Gen. Francisco Mejía and his US counterpart Gen. Winfield Scott, but it was a level of belligerence that would hardly secure them mercy if and when they were finally captured.



### **US assault at Chapultepec Castle**

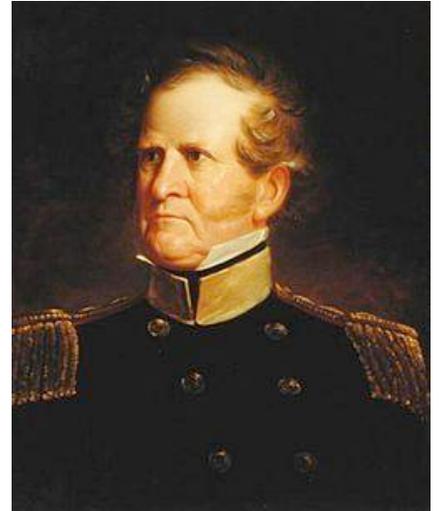
Eventually at the Battle of Mexico City, with at least 35 of their companions already killed, about half of the survivors were captured and perhaps another 85 retreated with the Mexican forces. Courts martial quickly followed, their haste to set an example and for vengeance clearly indicated by the absence of both representation of legal counsel and written records. It is an interesting fact that one of the 96% of Irish soldiers in the US Army who did not desert, the Irish-born Col. Bennet Riley, presided over the court martial in San Angel. Of those captured, two escaped execution, one because of “improper enlistment” in the Mexican Army and the other due to insanity; later, after pressure from eminent people such as the Archbishop of Mexico City and the British minister, another nine were pardoned due to their youth and another owing to drink. An interesting quirk of military law dictated that, since they had deserted *before* the war began, John Riley and several others received a sentence of whipping administered by Mexican muleteers (who were notably enjoined to make their best efforts in this task), branding with a “D” on the cheek and imprisonment. As for the others, their sentence was death by execution. The powerful message of keeping the condemned with nooses around their necks for four-and-a-half hours at a hanging presided by a man with a reputation for rape and the murder of a slave girl, is well known. The riposte to this insult – the cheering of the Mexican flag by the men about to die – is also equally well known.



**William Harney**

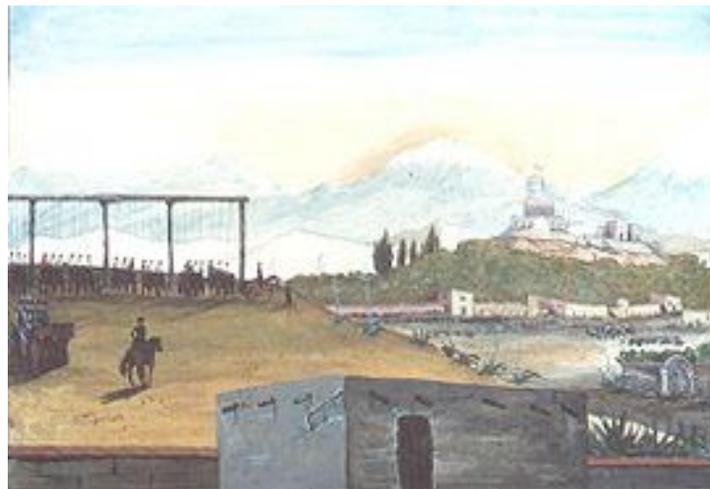


**Bennet Riley**



**Winfield Scott**

There are some revealing facts about the war as they relate to the San Patricios. It is quite plain that they were made scapegoats in a war that often lacked basic military discipline and solidarity: the desertion rate in this war was twice as high as that of the war in Vietnam, but desertion specifically by Irish soldiers was in fact much lower than the overall percentage. However, the San Patricios were the only deserters executed as a group and the perception was created among certain elements of the army that the loyalty of Irish troops was not to be relied on. One could argue that the fact that they were deemed so successful as a fighting unit and such a threat if allowed to survive is a compliment to them. Interestingly, the battalion was revived by March 1848 but their level of indiscipline, as much as budget cuts, obliged President José Joaquín de Herrera to dissolve the group later in the same year.



**Hanging of captured members of the St. Patrick's Battalion, Chapultepec Castle**

Their brief existence, their relative success in battle and their final sacrifice were hardly noticed in Ireland. At the time the country was experiencing the Great Famine which led to of hundreds of thousands of deaths and a larger number emigrating. The scale of domestic misery obliterated all possible interest in the execution of a few dozen emigrants in a distant and unfamiliar land. Mexico I think still remembers them and is grateful; some survivors, disallowed from entering the US, appear to have taken up their land grants, while perhaps twenty more had returned to Ireland by the end of 1851.

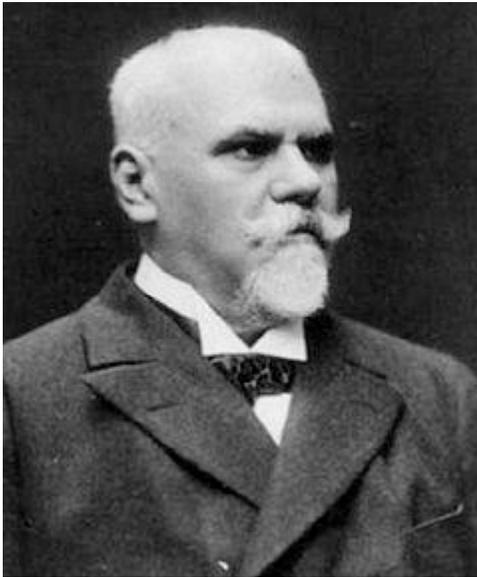


Plaque listing members of the St. Patrick's Battalion, San Angel, Mexico City

### The Later Irish and Conclusions

Since that turbulent epoch in Mexico's history, the arrival of Irish people and the lives of their descendents have been much more pacific. But there was still some opportunity for an Iris-Mexican to cause political mischief in Mexico. In his capacity as legal advisor to the state of Yucatán, Justo Sierra O'Reilly declared the state independent from Mexico. His now perhaps more famous son, Justo Sierra Méndez, was an inspiration to the ideologies behind the Mexican revolution and the intellectual father of the UNAM. In the tranquil field

of commerce, Eustace Barron along with his Scottish partner created the foremost British merchant house in the nineteenth century. The grandson of the first British consul (1823) to Mexico, Cecil Crawford O’Gorman, arrived to Mexico in 1895 and one of his sons, Juan, became a painter of the quality and innovation of Orozco, Rivera, Tamayo and another Irish-Mexican, Pablo O’Higgins; while another son, Edmondo, the philosopher- historian, became a founder of post-colonial research in Latin America.



**Justo Sierra Méndez**



**Edmondo O’Gorman**

Finally, the conclusion I wish to present deals with the reasons why Irish people did not come here. A series of eminently practical considerations explains the lack of a large influx. One reason has to do with the cost of the trip: with little or no direct transport to this country, the price of travelling here from Ireland would have been a pivotal drawback particularly in the context of more familiar and trusted destinations. There are stories of people boarding ship only to Canada and then taking the train to the US as this was cheaper than a single journey to New York. The outlay required became extremely important during and after the 1840s, once the Great Famine effectively performed its task of ethnic cleansing of the poorest peasants. What Mexico offered during the nineteenth century was a lot of land whereas the U.S., by contrast, offered both land *and* employment. Another issue involved the absence of a critical mass of compatriots encouraging those at home to follow them and guiding them once they arrived.

There was also a problem of compatibilities: the language that was spoken here was not English; the cultural, legal and indeed social character of the country was not one they would have been at home with, though a few made the necessary effort and grew to love

the general Mexican make-up. There was in addition the perception, whether based on reality or not, that the country practiced an ethic and performed its politics in an alien and unstable way. Corruption and not adhering to the rule of law are after all a great deterrence even to the most desperate emigrant. But simply, the fact that the United Kingdom, the US and Canada, Australia, New Zealand and even Argentina were all options on the menu of destinations meant that Mexico was rarely first choice. And then, of course, even if they came here, there was every possibility that sooner or later Irish immigrants would leave anyway on finding the required adjustment too difficult.

In more recent times, those who came typically did so because they were invited to take a position here or a business opportunity was identified and acted upon. As we saw earlier, their path to Mexico could have been a contorted one. The Murray family of actors arrived from Northern Ireland via Argentina to Mexico, the Milmos passed from Sligo to the US and then here, the O'Farrills started in county Longford and came here after sojourns in Spain and elsewhere. They are relatively new arrivals, are well-known because of their success in the field of media, and one senses they feel at home here.

Why would an Irish person feel this way about Mexico? Let me posit a theory. Ireland is a country that often suffers from a well-concealed lack of self-esteem, a debilitating assessment of itself that is fortified by its habit of comparing itself to its larger neighbouring country, in this case the Great Britain. "Tan lejos de Dios, tan cerca de Inglaterra" as a phrase could capture this mentality. Mexico has a similar disposition. Ireland is a country in Europe but does not entirely feel itself European. Its people are first loyal to their county, city or region; then they identify themselves with the country itself; then perhaps they feel themselves part of the British Isles and, after that, of the Anglo-American or English-speaking world. Somewhere within this mix, or perhaps right at the end, they are Europeans. In an identical way, according to the map Mexico is part of North America but many of its people don't genuinely feel themselves to be North Americans. If the two peoples are similar in something, it is perhaps this, among others. Although one would like to think that this habit of mind is growing weaker and the major compatible elements has more to do with personality and human sensibilities.

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